

# **The Repentant Sterilized Couple**

**By John F. Kippley** July 24, 2008

Imagine that you had yourself sexually sterilized at a time when your faith was weak, and then something happened to wake you up. You somehow heard that your Catholic Church taught that such behavior was immoral. You realized you should not be receiving Holy Communion in such a state. Then you learn about systematic NFP. Now you are really mad. Why didn't someone tell you years ago? You wish that you had never been sterilized. You would like to have it reversed and then practice systematic NFP and periodic abstinence during the fertile time. Then you learn about all the costs of reversal surgery, and you break out in a cold sweat. You would have to put a second mortgage on the house, and you can barely make your current payments right now. You have what many would say is an "extraordinary" financial burden to attempt to restore your fertility. What can you do? Are you required to abstain for the rest of your fertile years? Or can you go to confession, confess the sin of mutilation, do the penance assigned by the priest, and have no change in your subsequent behavior? Or after confession are you obliged to abstain during the fertile time, that is, practice systematic NFP for avoiding pregnancy?

Let us further imagine you find my book, *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis of Morality*. Let's imagine that the idea that the marriage act ought to be a renewal of your marriage covenant makes sense to you, and that you realize that contraceptive behavior contradicts this built-in meaning of the marriage act. Then you read its chapter on "The Sterilized Couple." You read that well respected theologians of the recent past have taught that repentant sterilized couples should undergo reversal surgery and then practice systematic NFP if they had a serious reason to avoid pregnancy.

Now it gets confusing. You learn that some theologians say that if a couple have an extraordinary reason not to have reversal surgery, they don't have to have the reversal surgery and they also don't have to abstain during the fertile time. To use the vernacular, all they have to do is confess it and they are "home free." Just a few prayers. No reversal. Continued sexual sterility. No abstinence. It sounds too easy to be true, and that's my opinion.

Why does it sound too easy to be true? Can you think of any sin where repentance doesn't call for a change in behavior? More directly, can you think of any sexual sin where repentance does not involve a change of behavior? Of course not. So what is so special about the sins of sexual sterilization and consequent sins of contraceptively sterilized intercourse?

I am convinced that repentant sterilized couples are obliged to practice the same marital chastity as normal fertile couples who believe they have sufficiently serious reasons to avoid pregnancy. That means that they will practice systematic NFP with chaste abstinence during the fertile time.

In a previous discussion on this matter, I was accused of imposing an unnecessary burden on repentant sterilized couples. This raises a question about my accusers' attitude towards systematic NFP? Do they think that the self-discipline of periodic abstinence is some sort of extraordinary burden? A burden, yes. Extraordinary, no. Far from it, such self-discipline is the normal practice of every chaste married couple once they reach the point where they are still mutually fertile but think that God is not calling them to have any more children.

In my opinion, the “too easy to be true” advice may be the single biggest reason why Catholics frequently resort to sterilization. What comes across is a simple one-sin, one confession approach to a complex and enduring sinful situation. “Get sterilized. Go to confession. Say your penance prayers. And you are home free to have as much sterilized sex as you can.”

Are the sterilized couples who take such an approach truly repentant? Are some priests teaching such couples that the canonical penance—the few prayers usually assigned as penance—constitutes the true repentance called for by the Lord? Doesn't repentance mean “I wish I had not done it.”? Doesn't repentance also entail the attitude that “if I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't do it”? Applied to sterilization, doesn't that mean that the repentant sterilized couple wishes they had not done it and would not do it over again? And doesn't that mean that they wish they were still fertile? And if so, would they not be practicing systematic NFP if they had a sufficiently serious reason to avoid pregnancy? And so, how could such a repentant couple or their consulting priest think that the obligation to abstain during the fertile time as part of their change of heart is somehow out-of-the-ordinary?

Sometimes I wonder if those who think that my position is too demanding actually think that systematic NFP is too demanding for real men. If so, that implies that those of us who have accepted it are really sort of an effete elite. On the contrary, I suggest that the real men of the Church and of our culture are those who accept the great challenge of chastity in a sexually saturated society. Most such men and their spouses readily admit that chaste periodic abstinence is difficult and that they need prayer and grace to live a life of Christian chastity. Not easy but true.

I am convinced that this “too easy to be true” confessional practice must be changed as part of the authentic reform and renewal needed in moral theology.

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Allow me to suggest that you obtain and read *Sex and the Marriage Covenant: A Basis for Morality*. I don't know where else you will find a 20-page chapter supporting the argument that the repentant sterilized couple ought to practice systematic NFP. Father Peter M. J. Stravinkas expresses the same conviction in *The Catholic Answer Book* (OSV, 1990). My chapter not only quotes him but also addresses at some length the various objections to our common conviction.

